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ENG 3701-002: American Romanticism

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American Romanticism Spring 2004

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Office Hours: 10-12, 2-3 T/R, and by appt.

Thoughtless people contradict as readily the statement of perceptions as of opinions, or rather much more readily; for they do not distinguish between perception and notion. They fancy that I choose to see this or that thing. But perception is not whimsical, but fatal. If I see a trait, my children will see it after me, and in the course of time, all mankind,--although it may chance that no one has seen it before me. For my perception of it is as much a fact as the sun.

Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

This course focuses on the literary and cultural history of America in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when American artists and visionaries believed in the possibility of a New World. Politically free from Europe, blessed with what seemed to be a rich and limitless geography, and full of opportunities for experiment and innovation, America had high cultural hopes for itself, aiming to bring to the world new ways of seeing and believing. American artists set ambitious goals for themselves, and some of America's most powerful and enduring literary works date from this period, and indeed made for America a lasting place in world culture—Emerson's essays, Thoreau's Walden, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson, the stories of Poe are all part of world literature now, read widely and admired in many cultures, and continually influential with other artists to this day, both in America and elsewhere. In this course, we will read and talk about these and other works from the period, and my hope is that you will come to recognize and appreciate what this literature can tell us about American history past and present, and to understand the degree to which the ideas, perceptions, and visions of these artists still play a central role in American life, both socially and individually.

Course policies are straightforward. This is a discussion class, though I will occasionally lecture when appropriate. Participation in class is a key part of everyone's final grade, and if you want an A, you must participate actively. Attendance is also important; I expect everybody to come to class regularly, and to stay with the agenda, keeping up with the reading, following the ideas as they unfold. Again, if you want an A, do all the reading as assigned and come to class all the time. There will be a take home midterm and final. In my evaluations, I try to be fair in what I see as an overall assessment of your class performance. Hold up your end of the bargain and I will hold up mine.

Books for the class:

Norton Anthology of American Literature

Lydia Maria Child, Hobomok

Lewis Garrard, Wah-To-Yah

D.H. Lawrence, Studies in Classical American Literature

Susan Magoffin, Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico